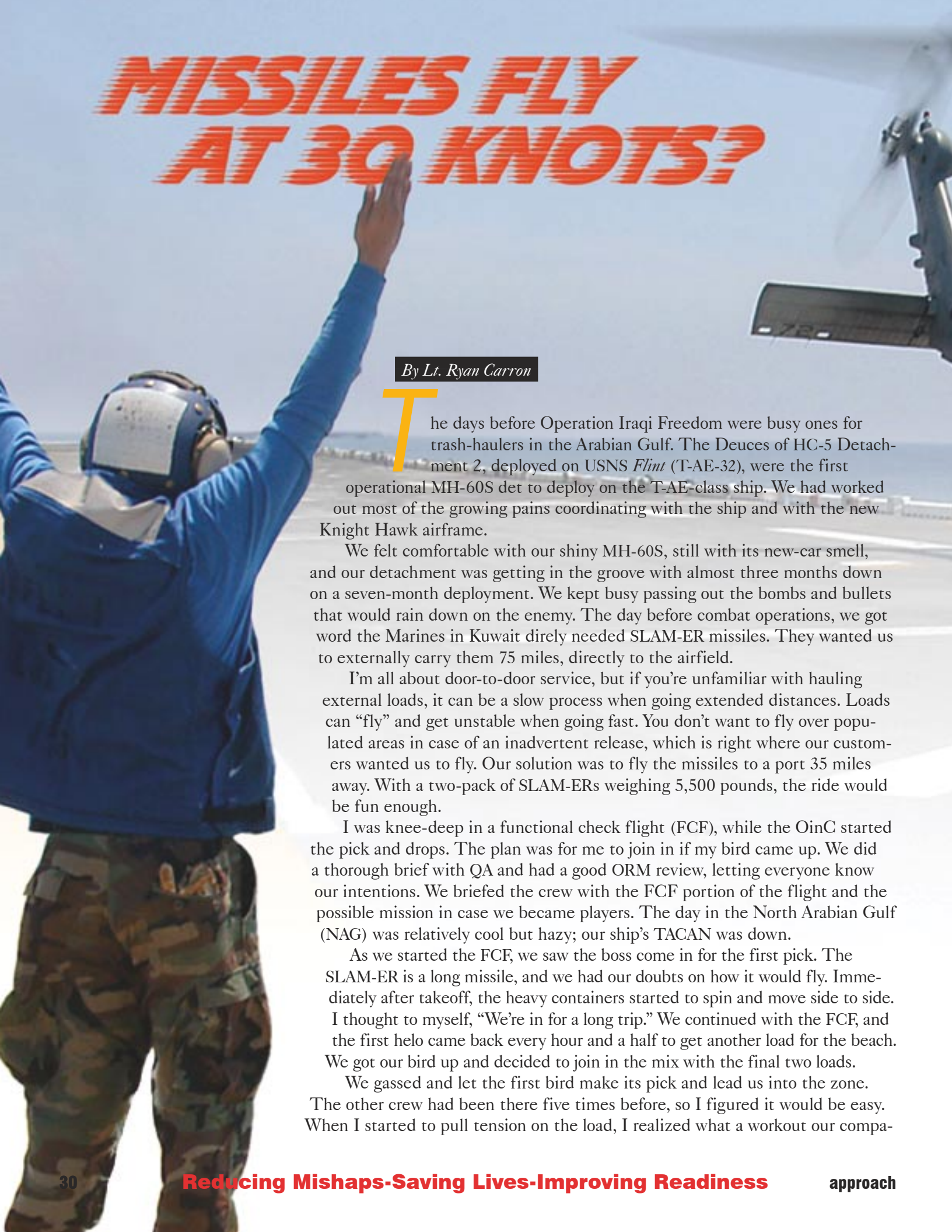
MISSILES FLY AT 30 KNOTS?



By Lt. Ryan Carron

The days before Operation Iraqi Freedom were busy ones for trash-haulers in the Arabian Gulf. The Deuces of HC-5 Detachment 2, deployed on USNS *Flint* (T-AE-32), were the first operational MH-60S det to deploy on the T-AE-class ship. We had worked out most of the growing pains coordinating with the ship and with the new Knight Hawk airframe.

We felt comfortable with our shiny MH-60S, still with its new-car smell, and our detachment was getting in the groove with almost three months down on a seven-month deployment. We kept busy passing out the bombs and bullets that would rain down on the enemy. The day before combat operations, we got word the Marines in Kuwait direly needed SLAM-ER missiles. They wanted us to externally carry them 75 miles, directly to the airfield.

I'm all about door-to-door service, but if you're unfamiliar with hauling external loads, it can be a slow process when going extended distances. Loads can "fly" and get unstable when going fast. You don't want to fly over populated areas in case of an inadvertent release, which is right where our customers wanted us to fly. Our solution was to fly the missiles to a port 35 miles away. With a two-pack of SLAM-ERs weighing 5,500 pounds, the ride would be fun enough.

I was knee-deep in a functional check flight (FCF), while the OinC started the pick and drops. The plan was for me to join in if my bird came up. We did a thorough brief with QA and had a good ORM review, letting everyone know our intentions. We briefed the crew with the FCF portion of the flight and the possible mission in case we became players. The day in the North Arabian Gulf (NAG) was relatively cool but hazy; our ship's TACAN was down.

As we started the FCF, we saw the boss come in for the first pick. The SLAM-ER is a long missile, and we had our doubts on how it would fly. Immediately after takeoff, the heavy containers started to spin and move side to side. I thought to myself, "We're in for a long trip." We continued with the FCF, and the first helo came back every hour and a half to get another load for the beach. We got our bird up and decided to join in the mix with the final two loads.

We gassed and let the first bird make its pick and lead us into the zone. The other crew had been there five times before, so I figured it would be easy. When I started to pull tension on the load, I realized what a workout our compa-

triots had been through; we were at our torque limits, with a little safety margin worked in. Immediately after takeoff, the load started to dance. A 5,000-pound-plus swinging load on a 17,000-pound helicopter definitely is noticeable and uncomfortable. I pressed on, thinking that if my mates in the other helo could do it, why couldn't I?

We tried various airspeeds and quickly found going over 25 knots was not possible without the load getting unstable. Fortunately, we had a tailwind and managed almost 35 knots over the ground. I had my nugget copilot figure out the gas; it would be tight, but we would make it.

I had my hands full flying the aircraft and controlling the load. The seat cushion firmly was planted you know where as the swinging two-pack of missiles shook the airframe. To top it off, we had a hard time keeping up with our playmates as they pressed through to the beach. Because we had to go through the controlled airspace of several amphibs, my trusty copilot was busy tuning TACANs and center freqs to deconflict in the congested airspace of the NAG.

Halfway to the drop zone, our playmate queried, "You must've got one of the spinning ones, huh?"

I thought, "Thanks for the info." Talk about being a day late and a dollar short.

Our playmate guided us into the drop zone, and my copilot backed me up on the gauges as we dropped the load. We briefed the potential for brownout but maintained good reference with no problems. The helo sure flew better without that 5,500-pound monster hanging onto our hook. The ride back was going to be tight with the gas situation.

On the way, we had to deconflict with the sea of ships operating in the NAG, and we were going to a ship with a down TACAN. I also needed to remove that seat cushion. On a positive note, we were able to beg some deck time from one of the amphibs. A fellow HC-bubba was working the tower and gladly gave us a drink after he recovered his harriers.

Here's what we learned:

1. If the load is not flying right, set it down, and have the deck guys rerig it. Apparently, five of the seven loads flew great. Better comms between the helo pilots would have settled this issue.

2. Divide responsibilities in the high op-tempo environments. While I concentrated on flying, my copilot could focus on other details.

3. Never pass up gas. We could have put ourselves in a bad position by going to a boat with no TACAN and relying on them to be where they were.

4. Brief contingencies. We were ready for the mission, and the FCF-and-go was planned, and ORM was covered.

Lt. Carron currently flies with HC-5